Simon Charlie Is an Altruist

By CHARLES THOMPSON

TOTEM CARVER

TRIBAL TABOOS, ancient superstitions and 'the wrong background" have failed to still the adze of one of B.C.'s most prolific and creative contemporary Indian carvers.

While many of his people are burning irreplaceable ceremonial costumes and effigy masks (symbolically returning them to their original owners), Simon Charlie, 39, a Cowichan Indian living near Duncan, is trying to reproduce them so they will not be lost to future generations.

But his main interest is totems. From descriptions, he has carved replicas of some that were destroyed 50 years ago. Some are his own creation and have never been carved before. These come from the legends of his people.

His largest pole is from a Cowichan tale. It is a 30-footer, sold for $850 to the T. Eaton Co. at Nanaimo for their new store. But sales are slow and he has a lot placed around in stores in lower Vancouver Island. He has sold totems as far away as Massachusetts.

Indians in Quamichan village, where he lives on the bank of the Cowichan river, have given a mixed reception to the re-creation of the band's private poles. Some of his neighbors object that he sells them.

"Some think I have a good thing, that I'm capitalizing on tourists," laughed the soft-spoken Indian.

"The time is past when carvers could make money off them. Poles are turned out by the thousands by machines in Japan. Automation has moved in," he said.

Younger people, generally, do not care what he does. Many come to visit and admire his work. A few wish him misfortune.

A lot of the older people feel family and band totems and other "sacred" artifacts, should be kept for Indians and away from whites.

"I can see no reason for it myself," commented Simon. "All I am interested in is that these things do not disappear and get forgotten."

Although they will not comment for publication, the churches (Catholic, Anglican and "Shakers") and the Indian department agree that too much interest in the past makes Indians dissatisfied and retards their advance.

"Maybe. But totems are one of the good things in the Indians' former life that should be remembered," Simon said.

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Several times he has been approached by Saanich Indians to make burial poles.

"Some of my family thought it would be bad to have the totems in a cemetery. It's just a superstition, of course. But to keep the family happy I didn't carve them," he explained, laughing.

This was one of the superstitions he has had to cope with. There are many others.

"It's supposed to be bad to carve on cedar after three in the afternoon. That's when I do most of my work, and I've been doing it for years. I've never suffered from it," Simon said.

Simon admits that he doesn't know whether to believe the myths and superstitions of his people. Some worry him, and others, that are widely believed, he ignores.

He says this is because he grew up with white children, worked for non-Indians and received a religious upbringing in the Catholic church. Simon says he was a typical Indian boy, interested in hunting and fishing—but not work.

With his own trap line, dugout canoe and the freedom of the myraid, secluded streams and hidden pools of the river bottom, he roamed at will and trapped mink, muskrat, coon and otter.

But his carefree existence ended when he was 14 years old. Simon was put in King's Daughters' Hospital at Duncan to have his tonsils removed. Doctors found he had kidney trouble so they could not operate. He left hospital several months later still possessing his tonsils, but with a kidney ailment that will plague him for life. But most important, he had a burning interest in carving

One day at the hospital he was walking in the yard and found an apple box. From the ends he carved three totems. A nurse bought them and that was the start of what turned from a mere interest in carving to the desire to have for Canada the arts of his people.

After leaving the hospital he tried to earn a living by carving, but had to give it up a year later. To earn money for his daily bread and to help his family, Simon did odd jobs for Cowichan residents. At this time local farmers found he was an adept pupil in learning to operate a tractor. Now he owns his own and makes most of his income doing custom ploughing and haying.

But he could not stop carving. During the long winter months when there was no work, he carved for friends and his own home.

He married pretty Violet Sillseemlt, a member of the band, who has given him eight children in 19 years of marriage.

Simon Charlie with an example of his art, a wooden food dish of the sort used by coast Indians before the whites came. He has shipped one 900-pound totem to a buyer in Quebec, has sold as far afield as Massachusets and California.

Two years ago he donated two totems and a life-sized carving of an Indian figure to the Duncan Chamber of Commerce. They were erected beside the chamber office on the Trans-Canada Highway.

Since then he has spent most of his spare time interviewing oldtimers, tracing down tales and legends, and obtaining drawings or pictures of old totems that, through negligence, have fallen apart.

But his ambitious plans have been held back because he had to act as both mother and father to his children when his wife contracted tuberculosis. At first she was confined to hospital for 20 months, then released for six months but put back in for another 19 months.

Violet was allowed to go home last fall after a four-year bout with the bug.

Simon has been asked where his artistic talents came from. By chance he found his great-grandfather carved five poles for some nephews more than 100 years ago. The poles are in the provincial museum now.

"Good wood isn't as easy to find nowadays as it was then," he commented. "Now all you can find are course-grained logs, and once in a while a good pole."

Both his white and Indian friends "keep their eyes peeled" for logs for him.

Simon estimates he carves the equivalent of 6,000 feet of yellow and red cedar a year, about two truck loads of cord wood. At present he is working on eight six-foot poles, one ten-foot, a 15-foot Thunderbird-topped totem and a dozen ceremonial masks.

His work is done in an old five-room house inherited by his wife. For carving Simon uses an adze, made by splitting an axe head down the width. He prefers the small axe head because the extra weight means he does not have to use a mallet.

"Most sales are made to people who come to see me. They are usually the friends of friends," he said. "I get a lot of custom work, too."

Sometimes businessmen are too exacting in what they want. Recently he refused to carve four poles for a restaurant operator who indicated what he wanted.

"I won't manufacture something to suit them. If I can find a pole that could be used, I'll make it. But I will not carve anything that could not be considered authentic," he said.

Simon admits he would have liked the money the poles would have brought, but said he must be honest with his people.

"Last year I supported my family on $1,000. Most of it came from hay and ploughing. Very little came from poles," he said. "Although it was a good year it only provided the necessities for my family."

To help bolster his income, Simon is planning a museum in his studio. Among the displays will be arrow heads, samples of old carving, mats from bullrush reeds to line the walls of the longhouses and any other exhibits he is able to collect.

He would like to start a farm on the 33 acres of land his wife inherited, but says he cannot raise the capital.

Simon hopes to be able to make a "living wage" from the museum and by carving.

TALENT PROMISES ENTERTAINING SHOW

By BERT BINNY

NONE of our estimable Victoria travel bureaus will be able to arrange your itinerary or passage to Loodipoor, interesting spot though it appears to be. It is served by no rail, steamship or air line and is likewise quite inaccessible either by burro, camel or the proverbially patient ox. Quite obviously the travel agents will be stopped right where they are and so will you.

However, the Victoria Light Opera Company can do a whole lot better. Not only can they take you direct to Loodipoor which, geographers insist, is an island, but they can effect this with the minimum of upheaval and inconvenience and they time the excursion to coincide with big doings on the Island.

Loodipoor, geologists insist, was once volcanic and, during one particular eruption, a rather peculiar jewel with extremely peculiar properties was ejected. Placed behind the throne of Loodipoor ("the power behind the throne"?), it would glow like a traffic light whenever throne was occupied by a person with "singleness of heart."

Of course, the value of such a marvel is quite limitless. Clearly it would eliminate the necessity for elections, speeches, promises, parties and politics in general. Political candidates would simply sit in front of the jewel and be "candled," like eggs.

It is events concerning this jewel and its uncanny powers of perception which the Light Opera Company will be depicting on Thursday and Friday, April 2 and 3, at which time, the Island of Loodipoor will be removed to the stage of Oak Bay Junior High School.

This musical show—for such it is—"The Jewel of Loodipoor," is written and composed by Madame Winifred Lugrin Fahey and is to be produced by the Victoria Lodge, Benevolent Order of Elks, with proceeds devoted to the Purple Cloth Fund.

The production is directed by Don Ross, a prominent member of the Victoria Theatre Guild, while the design and choreography will be by Tony Maynard, formerly with the "Smile Show."

There will be a corps de ballet from the Katharine Costain Dance Studios as well as vocal choruses.

Peggy Walton Packard played Eleanor, whose unheralded and unintentional arrival on the island of Loodipoor generates all the subsequent goings-on. Indeed, Eleanor inadvertently sits on the throne and thus subjects herself to the appraisal of the famous jewel with what results those who see the show may discover.

Laura Miller plays Sally, and soprano Leona Hanley, a recent candidate at the Metropolitan Opera auditions, is also a lead performer.

Among the men Dick Pugh is "Detective Pye." Mr. Pugh has been seen in the Southern Vancouver Island Drama Festival. Bill Fahey is the "Prince" and George Espin is the high priest, Alib. Ian Willox is also featured.